CLAIMS

1. A system for dispensing articles to a consumer, said system comprising:

a first station at which articles having an assigned cash value are dispensed,

said first station a) comprising a first terminal at which a user identification related to an account can be input to process a user request for an article and b) capable of causing articles to be dispensed to a user,

said dispensing system further comprising a processing system, said processing system causing an article to be dispensed to a user at the first station in response to a user's inputting of a user's identification related to an account at the first terminal.

2. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein a plurality of articles having different cash values are provided at the first station to be dispensed.

3.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the
processing system is capable of monitoring a user cash account maintainable by
a user and related to a user's identification.

4.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the
first station further comprises an input site at which a user can initiate a transaction
to cause dispensing of an article at the first station.

5.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 4 wherein
articles of different cash values can be dispensed at the first station and a user
can initiate a transaction by identifying through the input site an article of a desired
cash value to be dispensed.

6.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 3 wherein the
processing system is capable of determining whether a balance in a user cash
account is at least equal to an assigned cash value to an article that is selected
through a user request for the selected article at the first station.

7.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 3 wherein the
processing system is capable of adding funds to a user cash account in response
to a user direction at the first station.

8.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 7 wherein the
first terminal comprises a key pad into which a user identification related to an
account can be input.

9.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 7 wherein the
dispensing system further comprises a credit card reader to allow funds to be
added to a user cash account by processing a credit card.

10.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the
articles comprise tickets or tokens redeemable for at least one of a) another article
and b) a service.

11.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the
articles comprise at least one of a) an edible/consumable item, b) a functional
item, and c) a novelty item.

12.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 further

2   comprising a second station that is similar to the first station and the processing

system causes an article to be dispensed to a user at either of the first and second

4   stations in response to a user's inputting of a user's identification related to an

account at the terminal at either of the first and second stations.

13.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 12 wherein the

2   processing system further comprises a central processor at a first location through

which control of each of the first and second stations is coordinated at second and

4   third locations, respectively, that are remote from the first location.

14.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 13 wherein the

2   central processor is capable of tracking transactions carried out at the first and

second stations from the first location.

15.   The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the

2   first terminal is capable of processing a user request for an article without requiring

inputting of any foreign object at the first terminal.

16.   A method of dispensing articles, said method comprising the steps

2   of:

providing a first station at which articles can be dispensed to a user;

4   creating a cash account for a first user;

assigning a user identification related to the first user's cash account;

6   at the first station processing a request by the first user for a selected article

by determining the first user's identification in response to an input by the first

8   user;

after determining the first user's identification, causing the selected article

10   to be dispensed; and

causing an assigned value for the article to be reflected in the first user's

12   cash account.

17.   A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 wherein the

2   step of processing a request by the first user comprises processing a request by

the first user by determining the first user's identification, in response to an input

4   by the first user, that does not require input or processing of a foreign object at the

first station.

18.   A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 further

2   comprising the steps of providing a second station at which articles can be

dispensed to a user and operatively interconnecting the first and second stations

4   so that the first user can cause a selected article to be dispensed at either of the

first and second stations and cause the assigned value for the selected article

6   dispensed at either of the first and second stations to be reflected on the first

user's cash account.

19.   A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 further

2   comprising the step of monitoring transactions at the first station from a location

remote from the first station.

20.   A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 wherein the

2   step of providing a first station comprises providing a first station at which articles

comprising at least one of: a) tickets or tokens redeemable for at least one of i)

4   another article and ii) a service; b) an edible/consumable item; c) a functional item;

and d) a novelty item can be dispensed to a user.